RESERVED FOR TOMORROW

THE UNOPENED NOTEBOOK

A Book by
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For **every child** whose classroom exists only in their imagination. May tomorrow leave an empty seat waiting just for you.

And to **my best friend**, thank you for believing in this story long before it became a book.

And To **my parents**. For every prayer you whispered, every sacrifice you made, every word of encouragement you gave, and every dream you helped me believe was possible.

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RESERVED FOR TOMORROW

BEFORE YOU TURN THE FIRST PAGE:

And everything begins with this question.

"Why do you get to study and she doesn't?"

No one really has an answer to this. Right?

"The "she" in question is the girl I had the chance to meet on a vacation, barefoot, wide-eyed, holding a rusty tin bowl like it was her crown. In my hands, there were books. In hers, water.

Same age. Same planet. Different opportunities.

At first, I didn't realize how much I benefited from opportunities that many children never receive, the one who just attended schools, took advantage of the Internet and was loved by parents. However, the more I explored my community, the more I found out that access to education was like a lottery ticket: **some people won.** Some didn't even get to scratch the surface.

And still, we pretended that the system was fair.

It was not.

I used to think school was boring.

Early rising. Long classes. Teachers who would explain boring stuff. I did not hate studying, but just could not find its meaning. Everything seemed too routine and automatic, kind of like brushing my teeth or tying shoelaces. Until I met someone who did not have the opportunity to study.

That really hit me hard.

Because here I was, complaining about homework assignments and cafeteria food when there was a whole battle going on elsewhere that someone else had to face to have the privilege of learning. It made me realize that no book ever taught me: **access changes everything.**

The point is, learning should never be rebellious. Learning should not depend on your gender, on where you live, or even on whether some man sitting at the door of the class thinks that you are good enough to enter.

Now imagine a world where all doors are open. No locks. No passwords. And definitely no gatekeepers.

No one ever tells you that this isn't for you.
That's the kind of world I want to create.

A place where a kid in Nairobi can code like a Silicon Valley whiz-kid. Where a girl in Lahore learns algebra while sipping chai, with no restrictions on her. Where a boy in Jamaica writes poetry under mango trees and ends up winning a Nobel because he deserves it.

A world where education isn't a prize. It's a promise.

Imagine an international community where "access" doesn't mean "if you're lucky," but simply that "you belong here."

And yes, I realize it sounds too good to be true, even unrealistic. But remember, some people once thought flying was impossible, right?

So, call me a dreamer or whatever you want to. But it's not impossible. **It's possible.** We do have all the technology. We do have all the intelligence. And we do have all the capacity. All we are often lacking is the willingness.

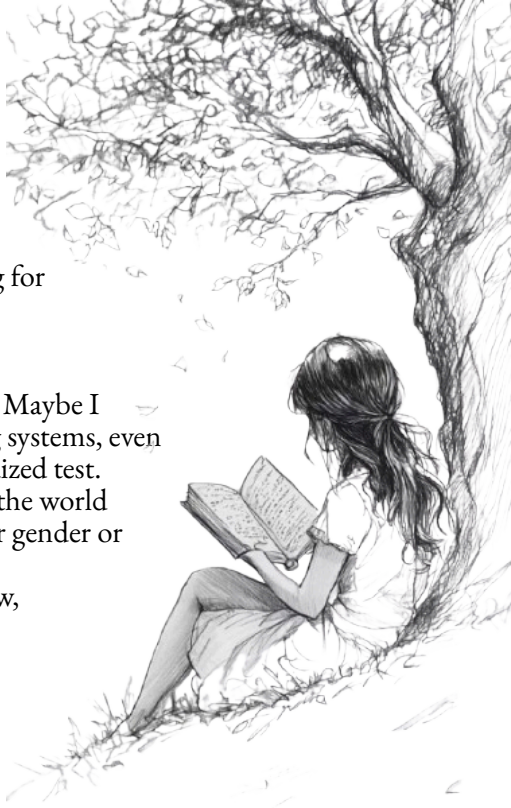
Education is not just about grades and books.
Education is power.

It is resistance. Education is silent battle against poverty, wars, and all "not-good-enough" voices that kids are hearing even before they start reading.

Unity, equality, and opportunities are buzzwords used all around the globe. Let's be honest: we're not there yet. Some nations have digital technology in every classroom. Others don't even have electricity. Some students are offered scholarships and tutoring while others receive nothing.

But what would it be like if everyone was on equal footing?

Here is the catch; thousands of miracles aren't required for it to happen. Just the internet, funding, and governments concerned with schools, not campaigns. Governments that are not concerned about political wars, but equality in the system.



Maybe I can't influence policies and build schools overnight, but I can keep narrating these stories. I can speak. I can write. Even scream if necessary. Because someone out there is still hoping for a miracle to happen.

They deserve to sit in classrooms too.

So maybe I don't have all the answers. Maybe I sometimes get lost among streets, among systems, even among the math sections of the standardized test.

But I know this much: The future of the world shouldn't be determined by geography or gender or anything else.

It should be decided by desire. The raw, unstoppable desire to learn. To grow. To thrive.

So, if I'm ever to build my classroom someday, physically or virtually, there wouldn't be any ceiling.

Just the sky.

Let classrooms bloom in every land,
With equal tools in every hand.
For knowledge isn't meant for few,
It's sky, it's stars, it's me, it's you.

THE EMPTY DESK

I was scratching my head so much over a mathematics problem that I was convinced I'd soon be bald.

"Find the value of x," said my book.
Sure, I thought. I would do that if only x decided to be found.

I sighed, twirled my pen on my fingers, and looked around the class for something that seemed way more appealing than doing mathematics.

The fan above us groaned as though it had been working since dinosaurs went to school. Someone from the first row was tapping a ruler on the table in a way which made it even harder for me to focus on my work. My best friend had already filled one part of her notebook with flowers instead of numbers, and I was starting to think she had done the right thing.

Then I moved my eyes towards the back row.
There was a desk there.
There was nothing special about it.
But...
No one ever sat there.
Not today.
Not yesterday.

Not even last week.
Come to think of it, I could not recall ever seeing someone sit there.
It was not broken.
It did not have its chair missing.

It was not cluttered with stacks of used books or dusty cardboard boxes, like most abandoned classroom furniture is.

It just sat there.
Every day, twenty-eight students entered the classroom.
Twenty-eight chairs screeched on the floor.
Twenty-eight schoolbags thumped down in their usual places.
But one desk remained completely unmoved.
I frowned.
Had it always been like that?

Strange how your eyes can overlook something for months only to find out that it merits your total attention one day.

The bell for recess rang.

Even before anyone could invite me to eat lunch, I quietly got up from my chair and made my way to the back of the room.

The closer I went, the quieter everything seemed.
Or it might have been my imagination.
My fingers gently touched the wood.
Unlike other desks, this desk had no initials scratched into it.
No drawings.
No pen marks.
No pieces of chewed gum under it.

It seemed like... as if it waited for someone who would be delicate enough not to dirty anything.

I saw something.
There was a small paper, folded, in the middle of the desk.
There was only one.
No notebooks.
No pencil box.

Just a piece of paper.
I turned around.

Everyone was out, running towards the playground as if they were allowed to stay there only thirty seconds instead of half an hour.

The classroom belonged to me.
And to the desk.
One of my greatest traits has been curiosity.
This is also what has caused me all sorts of problems.
I picked up the note.

Not really larger than a regular sticky note, it was neatly folded into a tiny square. For just a couple of moments, I considered whether I should not open it.

Perhaps it belonged to a teacher.
Perhaps it was left behind by accident.
Perhaps...
But come on!
Anyway, I opened it.
Two seconds was all it took.
Neatly written inside were just three words.
Reserved for Tomorrow.
I reread the phrase.
Reserved for Tomorrow.
Tomorrow?
Which tomorrow?
Was somebody going to join our class?
And if so, why did no one mention it to us?
I looked at the vacant chair next to the desk.

In some inexplicable moment, I was expecting somebody to enter the classroom, dump their bag on the desk, and start whining about the mathematics homework.

No one showed up.
The chair stayed empty.

I folded the note just the same way I had discovered it and put it right in the center of the desk.

Something about moving it felt wrong, as though it belonged there more than anything else in the room.

The bell sounded again.

All my classmates came running into the classroom, laughing, talking, sharing their snacks, and arguing over cricket scores and their undone homework.

None of them looked at the desk.

None of them questioned the note.

None of them noticed that an entire seat in our classroom belonged to no one.

I put my hand up just before the class began.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"Why doesn't anybody sit there?"

For a moment, she stopped writing.

The chalk paused against the blackboard.

She slowly turned to face the last row.

To face the desk that was left empty.

To face the folded note in the middle of the desk.

There was a smile on her face.

But not a happy smile.

That type of smile you put on when you remember someone or something.

She turned around to look at me.

"We will talk about it."

"But not today."

Then she turned around and continued writing fractions on the board.

As if she hadn't just completely altered the atmosphere of the entire room with those very few words.

I stared at the desk once again.

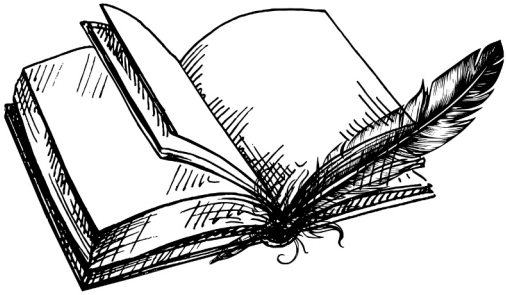
The note hadn't budged an inch.

It waited there calmly.

Patiently.

Reserved for tomorrow.

Back then, I thought it was waiting for tomorrow. I didn't realize it had been waiting for years.



THE UNOPENED NOTEBOOK

Where Summer Began

If anyone packed another sweater, I'm leaving without them."
Dad was standing by the car with his hands on his waist, staring at the mountain of bags, looking at them with a disapproving look.

"It's only one sweater," Mum's voice could be heard from where she was standing.

"Six of them actually."
"Each one for different weather."
"All of them have sleeves."
"But different sleeves."

Dad sighed like a man who lost the argument even before it started. Our small white car seemed quite normal until vacation day arrived when it somehow transformed into something between a family vehicle and a moving warehouse. Six suitcases stood by the back of the car.

There were also two backpacks on the porch. Someone brought food in a basket. Someone else decided to take a pillow from home, because, according to that person, no pillow outside our house had ever met acceptable standards.

Dad opened the trunk.
Then slammed it shut.

Opened it again, as if opening it twice would make the extra space appear.

"It will fit," he said.
Of course, it didn't.
Not even slightly.

For the next twenty minutes, the luggage turned into a puzzle. One suitcase was placed in horizontally. Another was inserted upside down. And yet another managed to perch itself atop the other suitcases while Dad pushed down on them with both his hands.

The trunk lid sprang open again.
Nobody laughed.
Soon everyone burst into laughter.

I was sitting outside waiting on the staircase with a rucksack and was doing my utmost to avoid the responsibility of carrying any of the suitcases. My backpack held everything I needed for survival for the next two weeks.

Three novels.
One notebook.
A set of colored pencils.
A deck of cards.
A flashlight shaped like a penguin.
A chocolate bar that I planned to eat by myself.
Mum appeared in the doorway with another bag in her hands.
Dad gazed at it with concern.
"What," he asked hesitantly, "is that?"
"Our medicines."
"Isn't it possible to have them in smaller packets?"
Just then, my younger sibling came rushing out of the house.
"I forgot my football!"
"You remembered it yesterday," Mum said.
"I forgot that I remembered."

Back inside he went.
Dad leaned against the car.

"I'm starting the countdown. Anyone still outside in three minutes will be left behind."

"But you say that every year," I pointed out.
"And every year nobody believes me."
"That's because you never left anyone behind!"
"I've thought about it."
"Mostly me?"
"Mostly you."
I grinned.
Vacation officially began when Dad made terrible jokes.
Finally, everyone was on board
Doors slammed. Seat belts clicked. Dad turned the key.
Nothing.
He blinked.
Tried again.
Still nothing.
Silence.
Then Mum asked the question every family fears.
"...Did anyone leave the lights on?"
Dad rubbed the back of his neck.
"Maybe."

Five minutes passed, and we found out that there was nothing wrong with the lights but rather with the car not wanting to be helpful to create an effect of drama, the engine finally roared to action.

Inside the car, we cheered so loudly that we scared two sparrows sitting on the garden wall.

"We are finally going!" my brother shouted.
Slowly, the gate vanished from behind us.
The streets became less noisy.
Concrete became fields.
Fields became hills.
Before we knew it, the mountains started appearing.
Mountains always appeared silently.

Initially, they were just blue shapes on the horizon.
Afterwards, they started growing.
Getting closer.
Getting greener.
Getting taller.
And eventually, they encircled us entirely.
I rolled down the window.

Cold air came flowing in with the scent of pine trees, wet soil, and an impending rainstorm. There's just something about mountain air that convinces you everything will be okay. The radio was playing old songs, that according to my dad were classic songs, but my brother was convinced that they belonged in a museum.

Dad still sang along.
As loudly as ever.
And as badly as ever.

By the third song, Mum had stopped trying to correct him on his lyrics and simply laughed. At intervals of several kilometers there were roadside tea shops where steam billowed out of dented kettles into the cool mountain morning air. People lounged outside, keeping themselves warm by cupping their hands around small cups.

Around one corner there was a young boy not much older than myself, blowing coals to roast corn. The aroma filled the car through the open window before trailing off behind us.

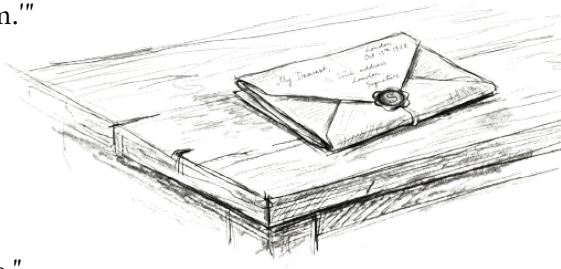
"If we stop at every food stall," Mum said, "we'll never reach the cottage."

"We're supporting local businesses," Dad said.
"We're buying corn."
"Exactly."
After ten minutes we were eating roasted corn.
The kernels burnt my fingers.
It was perfect.
The higher we got, the more silent the world became.
The cities were far behind.
The billboards disappeared.

Phone signals came and went, unable to make up their minds whether to come along with us. Clouds passed by on the roads without any invitation. At times, clouds surrounded mountains in such an enveloping way that trees seemed to be floating in the air. There always was a new viewpoint that seemed prettier than the previous one.

Waterfalls flowed over rocks worn out from ages of being rushed. Tiny wooden bridges crossed streams that glittered like someone had scattered pieces of glass across them. Sheep moved freely where they wanted, not caring about the cars.

Occasionally, Dad would point to a far away peak.
"Look."
Everybody did.
Then somebody would point in the other direction.
"No, look here."
Soon everyone was pointing to different mountains.
No one agreed which one was the prettiest.
They all were.
Time, just like during any other vacation, flies by without notice.
Suddenly Dad frowned at the road sign.
"Hmm."
Mum looked up.
"What 'hmm'?"
"No 'hmm.'"
"That sounded exactly like a 'hmm.'"
"I think I may have..."
He stopped.
"...taken the scenic way."
My brother started laughing.
"You got lost again! "
"I did not get lost."
"You took a wrong turning."
"I deliberately chose an alternative."
"It is what we call getting lost."



Dad was very confident for someone who really didn't know where we were.

Luckily, so were the mountains.
It did not bother them.
And it did not bother us either.

That is, as vacations are not about getting somewhere fast. At times, taking the wrong road gives you the best view.

Finally, asking three villagers, one shepherd and a shopkeeper who used a nonexistent tree to guide us to a familiar winding road which lead straight to the old cottage, we arrived at our destination.

"There it is." Mum murmured.
I put my forehead against the car window.
The cottage was exactly where I had remembered it.
Small.
Crooked.
Patient.
As if it had been waiting all year for us to return.

"There!"

My finger nearly left a mark on the window.
Before the car even came to a stop, the front door had swung open.
An old man stepped out onto the porch, rubbing his hands with an old towel.

Since last summer, his beard had grown somewhat white.
His smile was just the same.
“Well,” he shouted, “see who’s back.”
Dad got out first.
"Assalamu Alaikum, Uncle Bashir."
"Wa Alaikum Assalam."

Their handshake was slow and careful like the shake of long-time friends, not hurried nor obligatory but a habit of many years.
And then Uncle Bashir turned to me.
He tilted his head.
"You've grown."

I smiled.
"I hear that each year."
"And each year it's true."
"I was hoping you would say I have become wiser."
He pretended to consider it seriously.
"I will re-evaluate again next summer."
We all laughed.
He took hold of one of our suitcases before Dad protested.
"C'mon inside," he said. "The cabin has been waiting for you."

I didn't understand at the time that it was the truth he was speaking. It was years later when I came to realize that the cottage always did wait.

The old wooden floor was the first thing to welcome us with soft creaking underneath our feet, remembering perfectly well who stepped on it. Each plank of the floor had its voice. Dad could walk through the room almost soundlessly, whereas Mum always stepped on the complaining one.

The windows whistled whenever the mountain wind blew by.
Not loudly.
Just enough to make it sound like some distant hummer.
There was an apricot tree just outside the living room window.

I could not picture the cottage without the image of that tree. It grew to such a height and width that it cast a long shadow all throughout the garden, and its fruit was so delicious that we would always assure ourselves that we were stopping at "just one more." We never did.

There was an old wooden swing tied up to one of the branches, and the ropes were worn from being gripped by children over so many years
.
Every summer, someone called it unsafe.
Every summer, someone went higher on that swing.

On the wall was a bookshelf containing books with yellowed pages like the color of sunlight, and some even had little scraps of paper hidden inside between the pages written by former visitors.

There was a clock hanging on the mantel.

It ticked louder than any clock should.
Sometimes it lost five minutes.
Sometimes it gained seven.
And nobody ever bothered fixing it.
It somehow always felt correct anyway.
The kitchen smelled faintly of cinnamon and cardamom.

On the shelves stood a crackled China teapot, its tiny fracture running down one side.

Dad once offered to replace it.
But Uncle Bashir was shocked.

"Replace it? This teapot has seen more winters than the two of us have," he had said.

So it stayed.
Just like everything else.

At the foot of every bed were neatly folded hand-stitched quilts made by the late mother of Uncle Bashir years ago. No two squares were alike. Some carried faded flowers while others showed tiny stars or birds flying off towards some place unknown. Every year I would curl up inside them and wonder at how anything could carry the scent of sunshine, lavender, and home so perfectly.

Some houses hold people.
Others silently gather bits and pieces of them.
That cottage managed to do both.

And every summer, without anybody knowing how, it received us just as if we had never gone away.

That first evening always passed differently from evenings back home. No one bothered to look at the clock, thus making dinner last longer, since nobody wanted to be anywhere else.

After having done some early unpacking, enough to get hold of our pajamas, Mum declared that the rest of the suitcases could "wait until tomorrow." And indeed, only the next day did we finally get to unpacking. Vacations have a strange way of convincing you that tomorrow is an excellent day for almost everything.

Outside, the mountains were painted blue and purple as the sun began to set. The sun rays made the top of pine trees glowing just for some minutes before the valley became dark.

The old clock in the living room chimed seven times.
Then everything went dark.
Fan ceased.
Refrigerator stopped humming.
Even the clock was surprised.
My brother groaned dramatically.
“The electricity is out.”
Uncle Bashir chuckled as though someone had just announced excellent news.
"Good."
"Good?" my brother repeated.
"The stars have been waiting all day."

He went into the kitchen and came back with an old kerosene lantern whose glass chimney was somewhat foggy from age. A tiny flame flickered inside, painting golden circles on the wooden walls.

Mum smiled.
"I had forgotten this lantern."
"It remembers you," said Uncle Bashir.
We took our tea out.
We carried our tea outside.
No one mentioned using mobile Internet.
No one grumbled about weak signals.

In fact, I doubt anyone of us even remembered where our phones were. They had found their way into our backpacks somewhere along the ride, and, for once, no one wanted to search for them.

The garden looked much bigger at night. The apricot tree spread over us, forming a canopy over us, and rustled quietly whenever the breeze

wandered through. Beyond the fence, somewhere far away, a stream rushed over the pebbles, its quiet murmur blending with the endless chorus of crickets.

We sat down in some old wooden chairs.
Our tea came in old chipped porcelain mugs.
Steam curled lazily into the cool evening air.
Cardamom.
Milk.
A hint of cinnamon.

No café had ever served tea as good as that of mountain evenings. No café had ever managed to make tea taste as good as that of mountain evenings.

Dad took a sip.
Smiled.
Then looked directly at me.
"Oh," he said.
"I've just remembered something."
I narrowed my eyes.
"That's never a good sentence."
“It was the summer you declared yourself an explorer.”
Mum laughed before he could even finish.
“I was eight,” I objected.
"You packed your backpack."
"I did."
"Filled it with cookies."
"I was gathering supplies."
"A magnifying glass."
"Necessary."
"A notebook."
"I was recording discoveries."
"And three potatoes."
There was a pause.
"...The potatoes had names."
Everyone burst into laughter.
"They were my expedition team," I defended.

“You were crying because one potato slipped into the river,” my brother chimed in.

“I was very attached to them.”
Dad wiped tears of laughter from his eyes.
"You demanded that we perform a funeral for your team members."
“For Captain Potato.”
“He fought bravely.”
Even Uncle Bashir had to put his teacup down because he was laughing too hard.
Mum shook her head.
"You have always been wonderfully strange."
“I prefer ‘creative.’”
“You buried vegetables.”
“I gave them honor.”
The stories went coming.

Like the time my brother convinced people he can talk to cows. The day Dad got us lost because he proudly chose the wrong hiking path and ended up taking us to an apple orchard rather than to the waterfall. The year Mum made a cake that, despite tasting just fine, resembled a volcano.

Each story became slightly more dramatic every time it was told.
No one bothered to correct the details.
Stars started appearing overhead.

One.Ten.Fifty.

Then too many to count.Without the city lights, the sky looked impossibly deep, as if someone had thrown hundreds of diamonds onto black velvet.

I leaned back, balancing my chair on its back legs.
"I think I can see the Milky Way," I whispered. Dad looked up.
"No."
"What do you mean no?"
"You can see all of it."
For a while, nobody spoke.
There was no need.
Sometimes silence isn't empty.

Sometimes it's simply full of things too beautiful to interrupt.
A little green spark of light passed over my shoulder.
Then another. And then another.
Fireflies.

They wandered through the garden without any hurry, twinkling in the high grass as if the tiny stars decided to pay Earth a visit that night.

My brother tried catching one.
Every attempt ended in failure.
"They're laughing at you," I said.
"They're cheating."
"You cannot cheat at flying."
"Watch me."
Before long, all of us joined in.
Dad swore he managed to catch one.
He opening his hands in a very dramatic way.
Nothing.
"It flew away!"
"What a convenient answer"

The laughter echoed across the quiet valley before disappearing into the mountains.

Many years have passed since then.
I have forgotten which clothes I packed.
I have forgotten which day of the week it was.
I've even forgotten who won the argument about the charger.
But I remember the smell of tea cooling in my hands.
I remember the lantern glowing in the middle of the garden.
I remember fireflies writing tiny green sentences in the darkness.

And I remember looking up at a sky so full of stars that it seemed impossible for anyone, anywhere, to ever feel alone beneath it.

Back then, I thought that the most wonderful thing about that summer was already surrounding me.

I didn't know it was still walking toward me from the other side of the garden.

THE GIRL WHO ARGUED WITH GOATS

I woke to two familiar sounds.
One was the old clock downstairs ringing out seven with an excitement only an old schoolmaster would feel.

And then there was the unmistakable smell of parathas. If sunshine had a smell, I am sure it would be the aroma of butter melting on warm bread.

I flung the quilt off and ran downstairs two steps at a time.The kitchen was bustling. Mom was at the stove, expertly tossing a paratha that puffed proudly in the middle before settling back down.Dad had managed to grab the seat closest to the tea pot. My brother was still half asleep, his hair pointing in directions I didn't think hair was capable of pointing.

"Good morning," Mum said.
"It will be,"
Dad corrected, reaching for a paratha, "once this reaches my plate."
"It will get to your plate when everyone else sits down."
"I've been sitting."
"You have been hovering."
"I prefer to call it 'strategically waiting."
Breakfast at the cottage was never quiet.

The fresh butter sat in a tiny wooden bowl, so cold that it was almost frozen. Honey reflected golden rays of morning sunlight.There was homemade apricot jam that was so thick you could spread it with a spoon rather than a knife.

A basket overflowed with warm parathas wrapped in a clean cotton cloth.Uncle Bashir poured tea into little porcelain cups that never seemed to match one another from the boiling kettle.

And there were the eggs.
"I want the one with more pepper," said my brother.
"They all have the same amount."
"No, that one looks pepperier."
"Pepperier isn't a word," I told him.
"It is now."
Dad quietly reached for the last fried egg.
Mum noticed.
"So that's what we're doing?"
"What?"
"Stealing the last egg."
"I wasn't stealing."
"You definitely were."
"I was rescuing it."
"From what?"
"From loneliness."
Dad received the look.
Every family has a look.
The one that says, put the egg back.
He sighed dramatically and placed the egg on Mum's plate.
"I make one selfless sacrifice and there is no applause."
"We're eating," I said.
"Our mouths are full."
Breakfast ended the way breakfasts usually do.
Dad reached out for one last paratha.

Mum reminded him there were only two weeks until he complained his trousers had shrunk.

He claimed his trousers had somehow changed size by themselves. Nobody believed him, though. I quietly slipped away before anyone could ask me to help wash the dishes.

My book was exactly where I left it on the windowsill.
I tucked it under my arm and went outside.
The garden was still glistening with dew drops.

The swing moved gently on its own, pushed by a light wind that had the scent of fresh pine and wet earth.I settled beneath the apricot tree, leaned comfortably against its rough trunk, and opened my book.

The first sentence was excellent.
The second one probably was too.
I wouldn't know.
A child ran across the garden shouting, "Catch me if you can!"
Another child replied, "I already caught you!"
I looked up.

Three kids sprinted down the dusty road, laughing so hard that one of them nearly tripped over his own feet.

The book closed itself.
I could always pick up reading another time.

On the other side of the street, an old man sat in front of a small shop while fixing bikes with incredible patience. Every few minutes he spun a wheel, listened carefully, nodded to himself, then continued tightening something invisible.

Further along the lane, a man was pushing a wooden cart that was full of so many peaches that I wondered how they hadn't rolled out of it.

"Sweet peaches!" he shouted.
A lady buying some fruit laughed.
"My kids are impossible."
"That's right."

In the middle of the road, two dogs were sleeping peacefully knowing that the cars would simply drive around them.

A group of women carrying baskets paused beneath a walnut tree. Their chit-chat floated through the morning air, occasionally interrupted by fits of laughter that made me smile though I didn't have a clue what was funny.

The entire village seemed awake.
Not busy.
Alive.
There is a difference.
Cities often rush.
Villages simply... continue.
I flipped another page.
Or at least tried to.
Something moving in the neighboring garden grabbed my attention.
A girl, roughly my age, was chasing three very determined chickens.
"You owe me an egg!" she shouted.
But the chickens thought otherwise.
One escaped beneath a fence.

Another made its way to the top of a small rock wall with surprising ease. The last chicken just walked right past her.

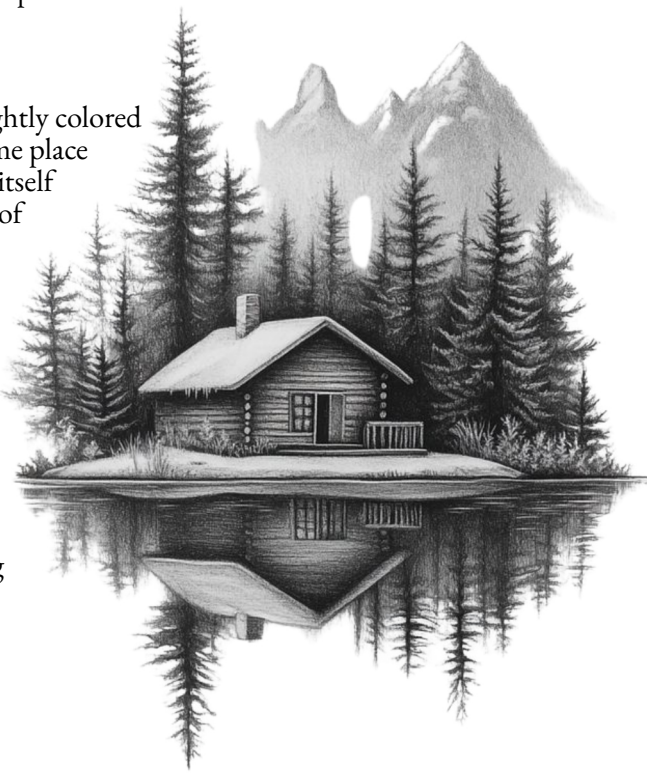
"I saw that!" she called after it.
"You did that on purpose."
The chicken was not in the least bit apologetic.
She crossed her arms.
"I'll remember this."
And I laughed.
Softly.
She hadn't heard me.

The chase ended when the chickens wandered off looking completely victorious. The girl brushed the dust from her shalwar kameez with exaggerated dignity.

"Fine," she grumbles.
"I didn't want your eggs anyway."
A goat wandered into the garden.
It immediately started munching on the leaves of her flowerbed.
"Oh, no you don't."

She marched toward it.
"These are not your flowers."
The goat went on chewing.
"I said excuse me."
Another chew.
"I am talking to you."
The goat looked at her.
Considered for a moment.
And then ignored her.
She put her hands on her hips.
"Really."
The goat won.

A few minutes later, a brightly colored kite swooped down from some place above the roofs and perched itself triumphantly on the branch of the apricot tree next to her house.



She stared at it.
It stared right back at her.
Neither moved.
"I can see you," she told it.
The kite was not
Impressed.
She went inside.
Came out with a very long
Bamboo stick.
She poked it once.
She missed.
She poked it twice.
She missed again.

But on the third time, she managed to knock an apricot right onto her own head.

She blinked.
Looked at the fruit.
Looked at the tree.

"I don't remember asking for snacks."
This time I burst out laughing.
She turned so quickly that I almost pretended to be reading again.
Too late.
Our eyes met.
She narrowed hers.
"You're staring."
"I was not."
"You were."
"No."
"You blinked."
"What?"
"When people stare, they blink less."
I frowned.
"I didn't know that."
"That's because I just made it up."
"...Really?"
She smiled.
"Maybe."

For a moment we simply stared at each other. Then she turned and walked towards the stone barrier between our gardens.

"I'm Fatimah."
"I'm Mina."
She pointed towards the book I was holding.
"Is it good?"
"I guess so."
"You guess so?"
"I keep losing focus."
She looked around the village proudly.
"That does happen."
"Does it?"
"There's always something to do."

On cue, one of the chickens that Fatimah had been chasing earlier walked by with some shiny object in its beak.

Fatimah pointed dramatically.
“There.”

“What’s it carrying?”
“Don’t know.”
She sighed.
“But somehow...”
“...I know it’s my fault.”
For some strange reason, I laughed maybe too much for such a joke.
Perhaps it was the fresh mountain air.
Maybe it was the fact that it was vacation.
Or perhaps some people come into our lives as old friends.

By the time the old clock of the cottage struck ten, we did not remember whose garden belonged to whom.

LITTLE THINGS I DIDN'T NOTICE

People often say friendships happen in an instant.
I don't believe this.

First impressions happen in an instant.
Friendships happen on ordinary Tuesdays.
They happen while waiting for bread to bake.

During disagreements about who should carry the bucket. While laughing at jokes that stop being funny after the third time but somehow become even funnier after the fourth.If someone had asked me when Fatimah became my friend, I wouldn't have been able to answer.

She simply...
became one.
The days stopped introducing themselves.

One morning we decided that climbing the apricot tree looked much easier than it was in fact.

"It'll be easy," announced Fatimah confidently.
"It has branches."

"All trees do."
"Exactly."
She climber the lowest branch with surprising ease.
I followed.

But halfway through, I understood that confidence and competence were two very different things.

"I think I am stuck."
"You have been climbing for twenty seconds."
"I had enough adventure."

She climbed back down while trying hard not to laugh and showing me how to position my feet correctly. By the time we reached the top, we gathered exactly six apricots and some leaves on our heads. It was a successful expedition. Another afternoon, we discovered a little nest in the hollow of an old walnut tree.

Three baby birds looked up at us with impossibly big beaks.
"They look mad," I murmured.
"They are hungry."
"They also look mad."
Fatimah nodded wisely.
"I guess one can be both."
After that, we visited them every day.
Not because they needed us.
But because we wanted to see them fly.
And they eventually did.
Without saying goodbye.
It was quite rude.

One morning, we found some pieces of old wood floating in the irrigation canal.

"They are boats," said Fatimah.
"They are sticks."
"They're boats pretending to be sticks."
There was no point arguing against such logic.

We looked for some leaves to make the sails.
Small branches served the purpose of masts.
A blue string was somehow used as a flag.
We collected them anyway.

Combining pieces of cloth, string, and far too many great expectations, we created the smallest fleet that has ever floated on the water.

Mine was clearly lopsided.
"It has personality," Fatimah said.
"It has balance problems."
Carefully, she set both boats down in the water.
For about thirty wonderful seconds, they sailed side-by-side.
Then mine went into a spin, happily wedging itself between rocks.
"It retired early," Fatimah decided.

We sat there watching her little boat disappear around the bend until it became too small to see.

"I wonder where it goes," I said.
"Everywhere."
"That's not very specific."
"It doesn't have to be."

The breeze played with the pages of the notebook resting beside me. I grabbed it, and started drawing our little boats, before I forgot how they looked.

Fatimah came even closer.
She stared at my hand moving on the paper.
Not the picture.
My hand.
How the graphite created little lines wherever I wanted.
But she did not say a thing so long until I turned around.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"You've been watching me."
"I know."
She gave me an almost shy smile.
"I love the way the letters come out."

"They are only words."
"They aren't 'only' anything."
I offered her the notebook.
"Do you want to try?"
For a second there, I thought she was going to accept.
Her hands were already reaching for it.
Then she held them behind her back.
"You will laugh at me."
"I won't."
She stared towards the canal.
"My handwriting will probably scare the fish."
Before I could even say anything, she got up.
"We have to race back."

Later on, that afternoon, Fatimah made it clear to us that we were going to make some bread. We weren't going to learn it; we were going to make it.

"Watched my grandmother do it hundreds of times before."
"Ever tried?"
"...Details."
None of us knew how to make bread.
In hindsight, this should have been our first red flag.

We got a bowl from her grandmother; she smiled in that adult way, knowing that kids are about to discover things for themselves.Dust was always raised in the air whenever any one of us sneezed.Dough was stuck to my fingers then the bowl and eventually on my elbow.

"I'm sure bread isn't supposed to behave like this."
"It likes you."
"It loves me too much."

Fatimah kept adding flour to it; now it was too dry and I added water to it.

It became soup-like.
We looked at each other.

At the bowl.
Back at each other again.
"Maybe, maybe bread is harder than it seems."
I nodded my head.
"I believe we've invented some kind of glue."
We used too much flour.
Too little water.
Way too much confidence.
The dough ended up being both sticky and dry.
"I don't think bread is supposed to look frightened," I observed.
"It'll improve."
It didn't.

By the time the grandmother came into the kitchen, the whole table was covered like it was snowing in just one room in the whole village.

She gazed at our masterpiece for several seconds.
Neither of us dared utter anything.
At last, she smiled.
"Seen worse."
"Have you?" I asked, hopefully.
"No."
She giggled.
"But I didn't want you to feel bad about yourself."
Even we couldn't stop giggling after that.

Uncle Bashir entered the kitchen, stared at our concoction for a very long time, and suggested that maybe the chickens would enjoy it.

Even the chickens seemed unsure.
"We must have upset it," I whispered.
Fatimah crossed her arms.
"It is oblivious to modern cuisine."
That morning, I rose before the sun.
The cottage was sound asleep.

But the ancient clock downstairs declared that morning had officially begun.

Fascinated, I crept into the window.

The whole village was enveloped by a light blue veil of mist.
The roofs seemed softer.
The mountains weren't sure whether they wanted to rise.
And there, in the middle of all that, walking quietly on the path there was Fatimah. She had something over her shoulders, but the mist prevented me from seeing what exactly.

She did not turn towards the cottage.
Soon, she was gone among the trees.
When breakfast time came, her chair outside her house was vacant.
"Why isn't your friend here today?" Mum said, pouring tea.
"I don't know."
"She will come."
She always did.
Sometimes late in the afternoon.
Smiling.
Sometimes brushing aside hair that fell into her face.

Sometimes massaging her shoulders thoughtlessly, as though they were painful.

"What have you been up to?" I asked one afternoon.
"Oh ..."
She stretched out her arms.
"Just helping."
Helping appeared to cover anything that happened in the village.
So I accepted the explanation.

Saturday was the time of the fair in the village.From the hilltop, it seemed like someone had spilled colors on the road.

Bright shawls hung out between the wooden booths.
Little strings of flags flapped high above.

Kids dashed from one booth to another with little paper windmills whirling madly in the evening breeze.The smell of roasted peanuts, freshly made jalebis, spices, and small charcoal fires filled the air.

Somebody was selling handmade wooden toys.Somebody else had stacked colorful glass bangles into towers that glinted under the afternoon sunlight.

We ate roasted chestnuts, watched an old man perform card tricks that fooled absolutely nobody, and listened to musicians whose songs seemed to belong to the mountains themselves.

"If you had a hundred rupees," Fatimah asked, "what would you spend on?"

"Books."
She rolled her eyes.
"That doesn't require any thinking."
"What about you?"
She searched the place for a long while.
Then she pointed to an old man making little wooden birds.
"One of those."
"They cannot fly."
"I know."
"Although they appear to."
This definitely was the kind of thing Fatimah would have said.
We roamed from stall to stall buying nothing much.
Sometimes things were better admired than owned.

A monkey stole someone's hat and then gave it back in return for half a banana. Fatimah burst out laughing and almost dropped her roasted chestnuts. In one corner of the fair there was a very small stall selling notebooks. They had colorful covers in bright blue, green, and dark maroon colors.

I stopped, instinctively.
"They're beautiful."
"They are," Fatimah responded softly.
I took one in my hand.
It smelled of freshness characteristic of new books.

"I'm running out of pages in mine," I told her. "I may get another one."

For a second or two, she was silent.

When I looked up, she wasn't looking at the notebook any longer.
She was staring at the balloons flying above the stall across from us.
"We should go and see them," she suggested.

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of rumbling clouds.
The mountains vanished.
Not because they had vanished anywhere.

Clouds just covered them up completely, turning the entire valley into an area where someone had rubbed out the horizon line.

"Rain is coming," said Uncle Bashir.
"How can you tell?"
"The mountains told me."
"They do that?"
"If you live here long enough."
The first drop fell on the porch.
The second fell on my hand.
Within seconds, it was raining silver ribbons from the sky.
"Fatimah!" I cried out.
She turned to look at me from across the garden.
No need for either of us to say a word.
Both of us ran.
Barefoot.
Straight into the rain.
The lane became a path of muddy puddles.
All the sensible adults rushed into their houses.
All the sensible children ran out into the rain.
Our clothes got soaked within seconds.
My hair braids stuck to my head.

Fatimah danced in circles, flinging her hands out wide, laughing as though she'd invited the rain.

"This is all your fault," I cried out.
"My fault?"
"You must have quarreled with one of those clouds."
"I won."

"You obviously didn't."

And we laughed so hard our stomachs hurt.But when it began to rain more gently, we sat on the porch of the little cottage, enveloped in huge towels smelling slightly of sunshine and lavender.

I opened my notebook, which was in my backpack.

Fortunately, only the corners were wet.

"I should write this down before I forget."

Fatimah leant nearer to me.

Not too near so she could read what I wrote.

Just close enough so she could watch the pencil movements.

"You really write about everything?"

"I try."

"So one day..."

she asked softly,

"...you'll remember today exactly like this?"

"I hope so."

She smiled.

"I think that's nice."

And then after some time, she asked me a question that I did not expect.

"And what do you do..."

"...when you have filled up all pages?"

I glanced down at my notebook.

"I suppose..."

"...that means you have to start writing in another one."

She nodded.

Very slowly.

When I finished writing, I offered her the notebook without thinking.

"Do you want to draw something?"

Her smile faltered for the briefest moment.

Then she gently pushed it back toward me.

"No."

"You don't like drawing?"

"I like looking."

That answer stayed with me longer than I expected.

By this time, I had started to notice small things which just wouldn't add up.

Sometimes, the biggest truths don't arrive with thunder. Sometimes they tiptoe quietly into your life, disguised as ordinary days, waiting patiently for you to notice what had been there all along.

A thought quietly settled in the back of my mind.
I'd never seen her carrying a single book.
Not once.
Not a notebook.
Not a pencil.

Not even an old textbook tucked beneath her arm like so many children in the village carried.

At the time, they felt like loose threads.
Small.
Ordinary.
Easy to ignore.
I had no idea they all belonged to the same story.

The thought ended abruptly as another of her impossible question came up.

"Do you think fish ever get thirsty?"

And somehow for the next ten minutes that seemed like the most important mystery in the world.

BEFORE BREAKFAST

That morning, for the first time all week, I woke up before the old clock.

Without any chimes.
Without any steps echoing in the corridor.
Without the smell of parathas that wafted from the kitchen.
Just bird calls.
There were hundreds of them.

Somewhere beyond the window, they had apparently decided the sun needed encouragement.

I pulled the quilt closer around my shoulders for a moment. The wind was chilly in the room, and the wooden floor looked far less inviting than the warmth beneath the blankets.

Then I remembered.
Fatimah.
She was always the one waiting for me.
Maybe just once in my life, I would be able to surprise her.
Silently, I went downstairs.
In the cottage, everything was quiet.

The teapot waited patiently on the stove.
The old clock counted the seconds.
Outside, everything belonged to the dawn.

The morning mist glided gently above the fields, embracing stone walls and apricot trees, unwilling to leave the night. Small drops of dew hung on the blades of grass, sparkling in the first rays of the rising sun.

It smelled different at such an hour.
Sharp.
Cold.
Fresh.
I have never noticed that mornings have their own smell before.
The village appeared less populated without its residents.
The doors were shut.
The smoke barely started coming out of few chimneys.
Even the dogs appeared so drowsy that they did not bark.
I passed through the lane towards Fatimah's house.
The gate made a sound exactly like an old gate should make.
I knocked once.
Nothing.
Twice.
Still nothing.
Just as I turned to leave, the door opened.
An elderly woman smiled at me.
She was wearing a white shawl even though the sun was about to rise.
“Oh,” she said softly.
“You're here for Fatimah?”
“Yes.”
“She left quite early.”
“So early?”
She just nodded as if this was the most natural thing in the world.
“Where has she gone?”
“To the well.”
And she said it as naturally as someone would say,
to the market.
to the bakery.
to the well?

I thanked her and followed the narrow footpath leading away from the village.

The mist lingered longer here.
Somewhere above the treetops I could hear some birds singing.
With each step my shoes would get little drops of dew.
I didn't know where I was going really.
But the path knew.
And then I made a turn and heard laughter.
It wasn't a loud one.

That kind which comes when you forget that you're supposed to work.

I smiled.
Right.
It should be Fatimah.
The first thing I noticed was not the bucket.
It was the laugh.
Cheerful.
Unconcerned.
It rang through the morning air like birdsong.
For a few seconds I couldn't see her.
I could only hear her.
But then the mist changed.
And there she was.

Standing by an ancient stone well in the middle of nowhere. The rope disappeared into the depths of the well. She leaned back, both hands securely gripping it and moving hand-over-hand until a heavy metal bucket was pulled up, water overflowing from its sides.

An elderly lady next to her chuckled over some joke made by Fatimah.
"I told you it would splash!"
"It always does."
"Only because you argue with it."
"I don't argue."
"You absolutely argue."
"The bucket starts it."
The women gathered around her chuckled.

One lady shook her head in amusement.

Another one whispered a quiet chuckle into the folds of her scarf. Fatimah grinned as though bringing smiles to people's faces was the easiest thing on earth.

She picked up the bucket.
Well actually...
she tried.
Water is surprisingly heavy.
I'd never really thought about that before.

She grabbed hold of the handle with both hands and heaved as hard as she could muster.

The bucket came up.
Slowly.
She balanced it carefully before beginning the walk toward the village.
It wasn't until that point that I saw the other buckets.
Many rows of them.
Waiting.
Some already filled.
Others were still empty.

Women stood next to these buckets, discussing with each other in the queue.Children no older than us carried smaller containers, walking carefully over the uneven ground.

Fatimah wasn't visiting the well.
She was working.
She hadn't seen me yet.
She set the bucket down beside another one already waiting.
Then she squatted and lifted the second bucket.
She stopped only for a moment to stretch herself.
Only for a second.
She smiled again.

The smile returned so naturally that, had I blinked, I might have believed the tiredness had never been there at all.

I watched her make the journey again.
And again.
Back to the well.
Fill the bucket.
Carry it home.
Walk back.
Fill another.
Carry that one too.
Each time this journey looked a little bit slower.
But each time someone called her name, she laughed.

Each time some old woman requested her for help, she quickly went to her. Each time some young child found it difficult to carry the bucket, she silently took it from him.

It didn't look extraordinary to anyone else.
It was not anything remarkable to anyone else.
They walked by as if they saw it every day.
Perhaps they did.
I stood there motionless.
Trying to understand something I couldn't quite put into words.
Yesterday, we argued for hours if fish could get thirsty.
Yesterday, we sailed toy boats down the canal.
Yesterday, she giggled as a goat disobeyed her command.
And every single morning before those moments...
she had been here.
Long before breakfast.
Long before I had even opened my eyes.
Some memories announce themselves while they're happening.
Others whisper.
This one didn't feel loud.
There were no dramatic speeches.
No heartbreaking music.
Just the sound of a rope creaking against old stone.
The splash of water rising from the well.

And a girl my age laughing as though carrying the weight of the morning was the most ordinary thing in the world. For reasons I couldn't explain then, I suddenly wished I'd woken up earlier every day before this one.

Because somehow...

The happiest person I'd met that summer had been carrying something far heavier than a bucket.

At first, I thought she was helping someone.
That's what friends do.
That's what neighbors do.
You fill one bucket with water.
You smile.
You head home before breakfast.
That was the story I quietly told myself.
Then she came back.
She put the empty bucket down next to the well.
Tied the tough rope around her hands once more.
Drew.
Water rose from somewhere deep beneath the earth.
The bucket filled up.
She lifted it.
Carried it steadily.
And walked back away again.
I waited till she disappeared behind the trees.
Some minutes later she appeared.
Once again.
The same smile.

The same joyful *"Assalamu Alaikum"* to all old women who walked past. The same small joke with the goat who came too near to any one of those buckets.

"Don't you dare!"
The goat looked at her.
"I can read your mind."
Another blink.
"No."
The goat made one determined move towards the water.
"I said no."

The old woman chuckled so much that she needed support from the stone wall.

"You will never win an argument with a goat."
"I have won against chickens."
"It's because chickens are more respectful."
"I don't agree."
She chuckled.
The other women chuckled.
Even I did.
Then she lifted yet another bucket.
The chuckling did not stop.
It only moved along with her.
By then, the sun was already up above the mountains.
The mist was already gone.
The village was coming to life.
Smoky vapours were coming out of the chimneys.
Someone was cooking breakfast somewhere.

Children were starting to appear in the lane, wiping sleep out of their eyes.

And Fatimah? still carried the water.
Another trip.
Then another.
Every time she returned, she paused for just a second.
Too short a time for anyone else to have noticed anything,
just long enough to stretch her fingers,
roll one shoulder,
take one more breath,
before smiling once again.

If anyone had come then, they would have believed that she had just started.

No one would have guessed she'd already been there before sunrise.
I recalled all the days that I've opened my bedroom windows.
The street had always been deserted.
I recalled asking where she had gone.
"She's helping."

I recalled watching her arrive each day, brushing her hair out of her eyes, looking tired but not tired enough for me to ever wonder why.

Some memories rearrange themselves.
You don't learn something new.
You suddenly understand something old.

Every morning.
Every single morning.

While I was still asleep beneath warm quilts, Fatimah had already walked this path.

Pulled this rope.
Lifted these buckets.
Before breakfast.
Before the village properly woke.
Before we climbed trees.
Before we raced boats down canals.
Before we made fun of the stubborn goat.
These cheerful afternoons had always started from here.
I just didn't realize it.
She saw me at that moment.
Her face lit up instantly.
"Mina!"
She waved with the same enthusiasm she'd used every day that week.
"You woke up early!"
"I wanted to surprise you."
"You did."
She laughed.
"Though I believe the bucket was more surprised."
I started walking towards her.
"I can help."
"You can try."
She gave me the wooden handle.
It didn't look weighty.
Looks can be truly deceptive.
As soon as I lifted it, my hands went down a few inches.
Water spilled over the edge and splashed on my shoes.
Fatimah laughed out loud.

“No, not like that.”
"I'm carrying it."
"You're wrestling it."
"They're basically the same thing."
"They're definitely not."

She taught me how to angle the bucket just right so that the water wouldn’t slosh out every time I walked.

I imitated her.
Awfully.
Within minutes, my arms were tired.
My palms hurt from rubbing up against the harsh wooden handle.
I glanced towards Fatimah.
She had already lifted another bucket.

As though she'd forgotten her own tiredness the moment she'd seen me.

She smiled at me.
"See?"
"It gets easier."
I believed her.
Years later, I realized she wasn't talking about the bucket.
Helping turned out to be much harder than watching.
The bucket looked manageable sitting beside the well.
The moment I picked it up, it developed opinions.
It lurched to one side.
I lurched with it.
Half the water spilt before I could make three steps.
Fatimah laughed so hard she dropped her own bucket.
"Not like that."
"I thought I was doing fine."
"You declared war on the water."
"I was winning."
"You were defeated before you even began."
She took the bucket from my hands with a smile.
“Watch.”
She didn't lift it with her arms.
She lifted it with her whole body.

One hand supported the handle.
The other maintained balance so that the water wouldn't slosh over the rim.

Her strides were short.
Steady.
Almost rhythmical.
She made it look effortless.
But it was not.
I made an attempt.

This time I got only halfway when another wave poured over my shoes.

"You're doing better," Fatimah encouraged.
"But it's still terrible."
"I'll go for 'better'."

By the end of the morning, I'd succeeded in carrying one single bucket without making at least half of it a puddle.

Fatimah applauded dramatically.
"I knew you could do it."
"I carried water."
"You carried most of the water."
"Details."

From then on, helping became part of our mornings whenever I woke early enough.

Some days I managed two buckets.
Some days only one.

There were days when I splashed out so much that I wondered whether my actions were reducing the village's water supply.

She never complained. No, she would only laugh.
"Tomorrow."
This was her constant answer.
"You will improve tomorrow."

WHAT DO THEY SOUND LIKE?

That afternoon, we made a getaway to our favorite spot under the apricot tree.

The branches above us rustled slightly, showering us with their leaves as if the tree too wanted to join the discussion. I stretched out on the grass with my math workbook lying open next to me.

Fractions staring right back at me on a page.
I stared right back.
Not much getting done from either end.
"I hate homework," I sighed.
"I think homework hates me more."
Fatimah smiled.
"It can't."
"It absolutely can."
I drummed my fingers on the paper.

"If fractions were suddenly to disappear from this world, I don't think I'd feel any different."

She looked at my workbook.

Grin still there.
But something else shifted.
Not much.
Just enough.
Like a cloud passing briefly across the sun.
She didn't laugh.
She didn't tease me the way she usually would.

Instead, she picked up a fallen apricot, turned it over slowly in her hands, and brushed away a speck of dirt with her thumb.

Neither of us spoke for a moment.
A light wind blew at the corner of my notebook page.
Somewhere, a cock crowed to nobody in particular.
After a while, I lifted my gaze.
"What?"
She looked as though she forgot about my presence in there.
"Huh?"
"You got quiet."
"Oh!"
She smiled again.

The smile returned so neatly that, had I not been looking, I might have believed it had never left.

"Just thinking."
"what?"
She looked toward the hills instead of answering.
"Do you think it'll rain tomorrow?"
I frowned.
"What?"
"The clouds."
She pointed toward the mountains.
"They're growing."
I looked up instinctively.
They were.
In minutes, we were debating the weather again.
She insisted mountain clouds could predict rain.
I insisted clouds all looked exactly the same.
She rolled her eyes.

“They absolutely do not.”
“You’re just making that up.”
“Maybe.”
The topic quickly faded just as it had shifted.
However, one thing remained.
It wasn’t anything she had said.
It was everything she had left unsaid.

That night, sitting on the porch of our cottage, as I wrote down the events of that day, I found myself halting mid-sentence.

The page spoke of the well.
Of the buckets.
Of the apricot tree.
Of the clouds.
But my pencil kept returning to the same small moment.
I hate homework.
It had been such an ordinary complaint.
The kind students make every day without thinking.
Still
Fatimah's silence lingered longer than any of her words.
I could not tell why.
Not now.
More and more days slipped past us unnoticed.
Soon, the number of memories exceeded the number of days.

On one afternoon, when we returned from our walk along the canal, I found myself counting.

"Five days."
"What?"
"Until my vacation is over."
"You have been counting?"
"I have tried not to."
She smiled.
"I don't count."
"Why not?"
"If I don't count, they last longer."
I decided that was probably true.
It made sense to me.

We had gone a little further when I remarked,
"Monday is the first day of school."
The words hung in the air between us.
She always answered immediately.
That day she did not.
She continued to walk.
A stone tumbled under her sandal.
She pushed it forward with her toe.
Once.
Twice.
Thrice.
Finally she looked toward the mountains.
"I think summer should be longer."
"I agree."
She smiled.
But it didn't quite reach her eyes.
And then she pointed at a flock of swallows that flew above the fields.
"See."
"They are flying very low."
And then we started talking about birds.
Our talk about school...
disappeared into thin air.

It wasn't until later that afternoon that I remembered she'd never actually replied.

The apricot tree had become ours.
Not officially.
No one gives you ownership certificates for trees.

But if anyone had asked where to find us, the answer was almost always the same.

"Beneath the apricot tree."
I lay on the grass with a novel balanced across my knees. Warm wind was wandering among the branches of the tree with the scent of ripe fruits.

From time to time, an apricot gently fell onto the grass near us.
Fatimah lay on her belly somewhere close.
She was doing nothing special.
Just watching.
I turned another page.
It was the soft whispering sound all books make.
A minute went by.
Perhaps even two.
And then came the question.
"Can I ask you something?"
"Of course."
She hesitated.
"Can you really read?"
I looked up.
"What do you mean?"
"I mean..."
She searched carefully for the right words.
"...all of it?"
I smiled.
"Most of it."
"Even the difficult words?"
"Usually."
"What about the really, really difficult ones?"
"I sound them out."
She nodded slowly.
As though it made a difference.
There was silence once more between us.
The leaves swished in the wind above.
A bee buzzed its way from flower to flower.
Then, so quietly I almost didn't hear her, she asked,
"What do they sound like?"
I blinked.
"The words."
She kept looking at the book instead of at me.
"The difficult ones."
"What do they sound like?"
Not...
Can you teach me?
Not...
I wish I could read.

Just...
"What do they sound like?"
I glanced down at the page.
There was a large word written towards the bottom of the page.
I recited it to her.
Slowly.
Carefully.
Each syllable melted into the other like stones flowing in the river.
She shut her eyes during my pronunciation of the word.
Then she smiled.
"It sounds..."
She struggled for the word.
"...clever."
I giggled.
"I don't believe that words can be clever."
"I do."
Her eyes fluttered open once more.
"Try another."
And so I did.
And another.
Some made me laugh.
Others could not be pronounced at first try.
Every time I stumbled upon one, she laughed with me.
Not at me.
With me.
After finishing the page, I closed the book.
For some time we sat there in silence.

Then I asked the question in such a carefree manner that I almost didn't think about asking it.

"Which school do you go to?"
The wind had ceased to move the leaves.
Or maybe it was just my imagination.
Fatimah's smile was gone.
She looked toward the hills beyond the village.
Not at me.
Not at the book.
Just...
away.

A long moment followed.
Then she said,
"I don't."
Nothing else.
No explanation.
No apology.
No complaint.
Just two words.
“I don't.”
For the first time since I'd met her...
I didn't know what to say.

I spent the rest of that afternoon thinking about two words.
I don't.
They seemed to be following me wherever I went.
While Mum kneaded dough for the evening meal.

While Dad discussed with Uncle Bashir whether the fish in the river had become small or the fishing tales had grown large.

While I pretended to be reading the same page for the fourth time.
I don't.
The words didn't sound sad.
That was the strange part.
They sounded...
finished.
As though they had been said a thousand times already.
The next morning, I carried another bucket down the village.
This time, I accidentally dumped just a little.
Fatimah clapped her hands excitedly.

"At this rate," she proclaimed, "next summer you'll have mastered the technique!"

"I certainly hope not!"
"Why?"
"The arms have filed a formal complaint."
She laughed.

And I laughed too.
Yet the question continued to dance around in my head.
Until we were on our way back to her house when I asked it.
"Can I ask you something?"
"You just did."
"You know what I mean."
She smiled.
"Yeah."
I glanced down at the notebook that I had under my arm.
And then I looked back at her.
"Why don't you go to school?"
She stooped down to pick up an apricot that had fallen off a tree.
She held it in her hand for a moment.
And then she threw it at a goat, who took the gift without delay.
"I should get home," she said quietly.
Before I could say anything more, she was gone.

I stood outside her house for several moments before knocking.
Her grandmother answered.
Same friendly smile.
Same warm eyes.
"Is Fatimah at home?"
"She is helping her mother."
"Oh."
I paused.

Sometimes there are questions that feel heavy to ask before you actually ask them.

This was one of such questions.
"I hope you won't mind me asking..."
The old lady waited.
"... why doesn't Fatimah attend school?"
In a split second, I thought I saw a look of sadness on her face.
But she smiled.
Tired smile.
"We are not poor, beta."
That came as a shock to me.

"I didn't say that."
"But you were thinking about it."
Perhaps I was.
She moved aside slightly.
"Please come in."
The living room was small but cozy.
There was a wooden shelf along one of the walls.
On it there were neatly folded beddings, family photographs and battery-operated radio.Soft whispers could be heard through it, broadcasting the afternoon news.

Stacks of newspapers, folded neatly, were kept beside the window.
There was a schoolbag hanging on a nail above the door.
It was not old.
It was not worn.
It was almost brand-new.
I glanced towards a little table.

Some untouched notebooks were arranged neatly next to a box of sharpened pencils.

I frowned.
Unintentionally.
The old lady noticed.
"These things belong to my grandson."
"He goes to school?"
"Yes."
The silence filled the whole room.
I turned back towards the books.
And then I looked towards the radio.
And towards the newspapers.

Nothing of that house seemed to correspond to what I had built in my mind.

I had been expecting bare walls.
No books.
No electricity.
No opportunity.
But rather...

something else.
The old lady followed my glance.
Then, in the calmest voice imaginable, she said,
"Girls don't need school."
I thought I had misheard her.
She continued folding a towel.
As casually as though she'd said,
The bread is ready.
Or...
It might rain later.
"They learn what they need at home."
She smoothed the towel with both hands.
"They'll marry one day."
Another fold.
"That is enough."

I looked toward the doorway, half expecting Fatimah to walk in laughing about another argument with a goat.

Instead...
there was only silence.
Until that moment, I had believed the problem was distance.
Or poverty.
Or missing classrooms.
Something you could fix with bricks.
Or books.
Or scholarships.
I hadn't imagined that a school could exist...and still remain closed.
Not because its doors were locked.

But because someone had already decided who was allowed to walk through them.

Unconsciously, my eyes strayed to the empty notebooks lying on the desk.

They were waiting for someone.
Just...
not her.

RESERVED FOR TOMORROW

That last morning came far too soon.
Vacations have a strange habit of doing that.

One minute you convince yourself that you haven't even put down your luggage.And the next minute you are looking for which piece of luggage your socks went into.

The cottage looked different with everything packed away.
The bookshelf was exactly where it had always been.
The old clock continued to tick along the wall.
The swing continued to sway gently under the apricot tree.
Nothing had changed.
Except that we were leaving.

Dad was already out there struggling to get six suitcases into a car meant to carry four.

"They fitted on the way here," he insisted.
"They also fell on my head," my brother reminded him.
"That was gravity."
"That was your packing."

Mum shook her head.
"Can we argue after we leave?"
“We can do that for sure,” Dad replied.
“It will reduce our traveling time.”
I chuckled.
Though certainly not as easy as I did a week ago.
I walked across the lane for the last time.
Fatimah stood under the apricot tree.
As if she knew I was coming.
“So…”
I said.
“So…”
Neither of us was really great at saying goodbye.
She kicked a fallen apricot with the tip of her sandal.
“I guess you will have homework again.”
“I guess I will.”
“And you will complain about it.”
“Sure.”
She grinned.
“That is what you always do.”
“And you will probably fight with another goat.”
“The goat will deserve that.”
“I don’t doubt that.”
We laughed.
A little bit.
Then the laughter quietly disappeared.
I reached into my backpack.
"I almost forgot."
"What?"
I pulled out a notebook.
Its cover was sky blue.
The same one I'd bought at the village fair but never used.
The pages were still perfectly blank.
"I was saving it."
She looked at it.
Then at me.
"For me?"
I nodded.
"I have more back at home."
She didn't grab it immediately.

As if somehow just touching it would cause it to vanish into thin air.
But finally, she took it in both her hands.
Very cautiously.
As if it was fragile.
She traced a finger over the smooth cover without opening it.
"It's beautiful."
"I thought you could keep it."
She smiled.
"I will."
She didn't say anything else.
Neither did I.
Some gifts don't need explanations.
Dad called from across the road.
"Mina!"
"We're leaving!"
"Have to go now."
"I know."
She pressed the notebook against her chest.
"I'll wave when you leave."
"You'd better."
"I will."
We hugged.
It was not an airport hug or a train station hug.
It was brief.
Awkward even.
Like the hugs children give because words are inadequate yet.
And then I got into the car.
Engine roaring.
Gravel crunching under the tires.
The house getting smaller as we moved slowly away down the lane.
I leaned out of the window.
Searching for Fatimah.
There she was.
Standing beside the road.
Exactly where she'd promised.
Waiting.
I lifted my hand to wave.
She didn't.
She simply stood there.
Watching.

The breeze played gently with the loose strands of her hair.

Both arms were wrapped tightly around something she held against her chest.

Not flowers.
Not a toy.
Not a souvenir from the fair.
The notebook.
Still unopened.
Still empty.
As though it had something valuable within its covers.
The road gracefully curved around the hills.
In the very last second, she was visible to me.
Exactly where she was standing.
Then, the mountains came gently between us.
She was gone.

The drive home felt shorter.
Perhaps roads get shorter when you're going away from something.
Maybe memories make distances smaller.

By Monday morning, my uniform was hanging crisply on my bedroom door.

My school bag seemed very heavy.
Not because of the books.

Because every time I zipped it closed, I thought about another notebook.

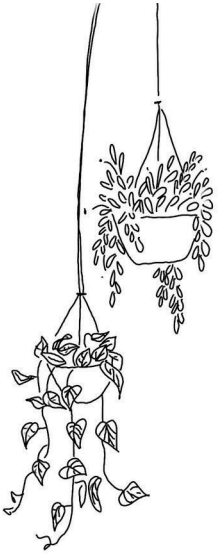
A book with completely blank pages.
A book which had been left behind in the mountains.
The clock struck as I walked into my classroom.
Everything looked exactly as I remembered.
The fan still complained with every slow turn.
Someone was already asking to borrow a pencil.

Two boys argued over a cricket match before the teacher had even arrived.

My best friend had somehow drawn flowers in the corner of her mathematics homework.

Some things never change.
I smiled.
Then I looked toward the back of the room.
The desk.
It was still there.
Untouched.
Waiting.
No bag.
No books.
No scraped chair being dragged across the floor.
Silence.
I found myself walking towards it even before I knew it.
The folded piece of paper rested exactly where I'd left it.
The edges had curled ever so slightly.
Carefully, I picked it up.
For a moment, I simply held it.
Then I unfolded it.
Three words.
Reserved for Tomorrow.

MORE STORIES ARE WAITING



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eman Ahmad is a writer from Pakistan who believes that every child has a story worth telling. She loves creating heartfelt stories that celebrate curiosity, kindness, friendship, and the power of education.

When she isn't writing, Eman enjoys reading, crocheting, painting, and exploring the world of data science. The Unopened Notebook is her debut children's novel and was inspired by the belief that every child deserves the opportunity to learn, dream, and write their own story.

She hopes this book encourages young readers to treasure their education, ask questions without fear, and always remain curious about the world around them.